

THE CANONIZATION OF KARṆA  
THE MIGRATION OF A HAGIOGRAPHICAL MOTIF

Many have considered the Karṇa of the *Mahābhārata* a tragic figure. Fathered by the Sun God and born surreptitiously by Kuntī, he was abandoned and raised ignorant of his true identity. Taught the profession of arms by Paraśurāma, he found himself unable to use this knowledge when he most needed it because of a curse, and was slain by Arjuna in unequal combat. In the end Karṇa is destroyed not because of a "fatal flaw", as A.K. Ramanujan points out, but because of a "fatal virtue", his great and unbounded generosity<sup>1</sup>. Karṇa had been born with earrings (*kuṇḍale*) and unimpenetrable armor (*kavacaṃ*) but gave them away. The story of his fatal generosity is not found in the text of critical edition of the *Mahābhārata* but a short version is found in appendix 60 of the *ādi parvan* and fuller accounts in the vulgate, as in the Gītā Press edition. There we are told that Karṇa's father, the Sun God, appeared to him in a dream and warned him that Indra would come to him in brahman disguise and ask for his armor and earrings as alms, and warned him not to give them away. Karṇa, however, replied that he could not refuse anything to a brahman and the next day, as predicted, Indra appeared and was given

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1. A.K. RAMANUJAN, "Repetition in the *Mahābhārata*" in Arvind Sharma, ed., *Essays on the Mahābhārata*, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1991, p. 436.

what he asked for. Karṇa's generosity thus was literally suicidal since he then could be easily slain by Indra's son Arjuna<sup>2</sup>.

This heroic act of charity is placed in a more dramatic setting in the play *Karṇābhāra* attributed to Bhāsa. Here Indra appears in his brahman disguise moments before Karṇa meets Arjuna on the battlefield. On his way to the confrontation, Karṇa notes all the evil omens and remembers the curses that have been pronounced over him, and when Indra appears, he suspects that this might be a trick of Kṛṣṇa's. But, as in the apocryphal *Mahābhārata* tale, he cannot refuse a brahman anything and so gives away his armor, despite the protests of his charioteer, Śalya. As he tells him:

Knowledge declines in passing time,  
well-rooted trees fall down,  
water collected in tanks dries up -  
sacrifice and charity endure<sup>3</sup>.

In later times the *Mahābhārata* war was seen as a struggle between good and evil, and as a consequence Karṇa, the enthusiastic ally of Duryodhana, came also to be seen as a villain. According to the *Jaimini bhārata*, a 13th century devotional text about Yudhisthira's *aśvamedha*, Bhīma told Vṛṣaketu, the son of Karṇa, that the Pāṇḍavas were ashamed to look him in the face because of the way they had killed his father. Vṛṣaketu replied he was not at all upset at his father's death, the Pāṇḍavas had rather done him a favor (*upakāra*), for by killing Karṇa they had put a stop to his evil deeds. Karṇa had been Duryodhana's servant all his life and thus was an enemy of *dharma* (*dharma vidveṣī*). Vṛṣaketu also pointed out that his father had stood passively by while the Kauravas humiliated Draupadī and added that

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2. *Mahābhārata*, *vanaparva*, Gītā Press, Gorakhpur, n.d. p. 336. (Since the passage is recognized as an interpolation, the verses are not numbered).

3. Translated by Barbara Stoller Miller, in Sharma, "Karṇābhāra: The Trial of Karṇa". A.K. RAMANUJAN, *op. cit.*, pp. 66. *śikṣā kṣayaṃ gacchati kālaparyayāt | subaddhamūlā nipatanti pādapāḥ || jalam jalasthānagataṃ ca śuśyati | hutaṃ ca dattaṃ ca tathaiva tiṣṭhati ||* 22; *Bhāsanāṭakacakram: Plays Ascribed to Bhāsa*, ed. C.R. DEVADHAR, Motilal Banarsidass, reprint: Delhi (1962), 1987, p. 485.

he had stolen thousands of cows from Virāṭa the Matsya king<sup>4</sup>. No son of Karna with the name Vṛṣaketu is mentioned in the *Mahābhārata*, though three others, Citrasena, Satyasena and Suṣeṇa, are<sup>5</sup>. Vṛṣa, it can be noted, was one of Karna's names. As will be seen, Vṛṣaketu later turns up in another apocryphal text in a very different role.

Centuries later versions of the *Mahābhārata* and themes derived from it began to appear in the eastern New Indo-Aryan tongues. Several apocryphal stories about Karna are found in them, beginning, perhaps inevitably, with a different account of his birth. According to the Bengali *Mahābhārata* of Kabi Sañjaṃ, Karna was given his name because he was born via his mother's ear (*karṇa*)<sup>6</sup> and the Assamese *Mahābhārata* specifies that it was Kuntī's right ear<sup>7</sup>. The 14th *parvans* of several vernacular *Mahābhāratas* are actually abbreviated versions of the *Jaimini bhārata* which deals with the same subject, the horse sacrifice of Yuddhiṣṭhira. In several of these, as in the original, Vṛṣaketu has the same opinion of his father. In the Bengali *Mahābhārata* of Kāśīrāmdās<sup>8</sup>, for example, Vṛṣaketu tells Bhīma that his father fell on the battlefield for the sin of having humiliated Draupadī, consequently there was no reason for the Paṇḍavas to feel guilt at having slain him<sup>9</sup>. In the Assamese version of the *Mahābhārata* Vṛṣaketu explains that Karna died because he fell from the path of *dharma* and had transgressed the commands of Kṛṣṇa<sup>10</sup>.

4. *Śrījaiminīyāśvamedhaparva*, Gītā Press, saṃ 2052, Gorakhpur, 2.12ff. This work is known under a number of different names.

5. *Śalya parva*. 10, 19-50 (critical edition, The Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Poona, 1971).

6. *karṇapathe nihsarila sūryyera kumāra*, Kabi Sañjaṃ, *Mahābhārata*, ed. by Munīndrakumār Ghoṣ, Calcutta University, 1969, p. 89; the date of this rendering has not been established.

7. *dakṣiṇa karnata hante bajāyā parilā; Aṣṭādaś Parba Asamīya Mahābhārata*, ed. Harinārāyaṇ Dattabaruvā, Dattabaruvā and Kompanī, Guvāhāṭī, reprint (1955), p. 500. This is a collective work begun under the patronage of the Kuc king Naranārāyaṇa (1540-1587).

8. *Kāśīrāmdāsī Mahābhārata*, ed. Maṇilāl Bandyopādhyāya and Dhīrānanda Ṭhākura Pāri, Tārācās Dās & Sons, Calcutta, n.d. This early 17th century work is the most popular of the Bengali *Mahābhāratas*.

9. *draupadīre upahāsi hīṃsila tomāre | sei pāpe mama pitā parila samare || sei hetu anutāpa kara ki kāraṇe ||| ibid.*, p. 1027.

10. *dharmapanthā bhraṣṭa bhaile mare sikāraṇe [...] kṛṣṇa bākya karilā laṅghana || Asamīya Mahābhārata*, p. 2182.

Nevertheless, the characteristic of Karṇa that made the deepest impression was that of his heroic generosity. The story of his giving away his armor and earrings to Indra is included in the vernacular *Mahābhārata*s, sometimes with the added detail that he cut the armor from his body with a sword<sup>11</sup>. «There is no other giver (*dātā*) like Karṇa in the world», writes the Bengali poet Kāśīrām, «Whatever is asked he gives immediately»<sup>12</sup>. This reputation for unparalleled generosity also inspired an apocryphal tale very popular in eastern India under the name of *Dātā Karṇa*, Karṇa the Giver or Karṇa the Generous. The *Dātā Karṇa* story perhaps first appears there in the *banaparba* of the *Mahābhārata* of Śāraḷā Dāsa (written around 1475). Śāraḷā Dāsa tells us that one day before the Great Bhārata war Kṛṣṇa assured Arjuna that Karṇa would give his armor to Indra when the time came. To prove his point Kṛṣṇa told Arjuna that he would test Karṇa by taking the form of a brahman mendicant and asking to kill his own son and serve his flesh in a curry:

If he kills his son and gives him to me to eat  
then he will certainly give his armor and earrings to Indra<sup>13</sup>.

Kṛṣṇa then took the form of a brahman and went to Karṇa's palace. There he was welcomed enthusiastically and his host promised to give him whatever food he might desire. Kṛṣṇa responded by telling Karṇa he would prefer meat and not only meat, but human flesh. Karṇa then reluctantly agreed and asked how many people he should kill, and was shocked once again when the brahman explained that the flesh of a single human will do: that of Karṇa's own son. When Karṇa protested at this, his guest immediately started for the door. Karṇa's young son, Biśīkeśana, had been listening to the conversation, saw this and ran up to the brahman and begged him not to be angry with his

11. As *Kāśīrāmdāsī Mahābhārata*, p. 806.

12. *karṇa samāna dātā nahila bhubane | ye yāhā māgaḃe tāhā deḃ seikṣaṇe || Kāśīrāmdāsī Mahābhārata*, p. 805; this is a stock phrase also found in Kabi Sañjāy, *Mahābhārata* p. 89 and other works.

13. *putra māriṇa bhojana deba mote yebe | kabaca kuṇḍala niṣcaḃe deba indra tebe || Śāraḷā Dāsa, Māhābhārata, Banaparba*, reprint, Dharmagranth Stores, Kaṭak, n.d. p. 77.

father. Then, turning to Karṇa, he told his father not to break his plighted word and send away a guest disappointed. Karṇa wondered whether the brahman was one of his demon enemies who had come to him in disguise in order to ruin him, but his devout son urged to do what his guest demanded and so Karṇa struck off Biśikeśana's with a sword as he sat on a deerskin reciting the name of Hari. The brahman then gave Karṇa's wife Tuḷasā cooking instructions: her son's body was to be cut into seven pieces, spiced and made into a curry (*byāñjana*). Tuḷasā hid the severed head without informing her husband and then did as bidden. When the meal was about to be served, to Tuḷasā's great surprise, the brahman demanded that she fetch the missing head and chop it up before his eyes and cook it as well. When the grisly supper was finally ready the brahman insisted that Karṇa and his wife share it with him. They protested, asking how they could eat the flesh of their own son, but the brahman again got his way by threatening to get up and leave, so they seated themselves with heavy hearts. As they were about to dine, Karṇa noted an extra banana leaf plate and asked whom it was for. The guest said it was for Biśikeśana and asked his mother to call out his name three times and as soon as she did so, the boy entered the room, unharmed, decked out in jewelry and mounted on a horse. Karṇa then realized that this had been a test (*parīkṣā*). The brahman guest then assumed the four-armed form of Viṣṇu and Karṇa and his wife rendered him homage. Here, then, Kṛṣṇa's erstwhile enemy Karṇa has been transformed into a devout Vaiṣṇava.

Several centuries later the tale appeared again in Orissa in another, more surprising setting, the *Dārhyatā bhakī rasāmṛta* of Rāma Dāsa, a collection of exemplary devotional tales<sup>14</sup>. The story found there is very close to that in Śāraḷā Dāsa's *Mahābhārata* with a few minor differences, such as name of Karṇa's wife which is there Candrabālī. In an interesting detail, Karṇa asks how his brahman guest can eat a meal cooked by a kṣatriya without losing caste and is told that in the house of a *bhakta* of Hari caste does not matter<sup>15</sup>.

In Bengal and Assam the same story circulated independently

14. Rāma Dāsa, *Dārhyatā rasāmṛta*, Anglo-Sanskrit Press, Calcutta 1919, pp. 17-23.

15. *Op. cit.*, p. 19.

under the title *Dātā Karṇa*<sup>16</sup>. An Assamese work with this title by Viṣṇu Bhārati remains in manuscript<sup>17</sup> as does a Bengali version by the poet Kabicandra or Kabicandra Śaṅkar Cakrabartī, author of the *Gobindamaṅgal* or *Bhāgabatāmṛta*<sup>18</sup> which some manuscripts of his *Dātā Karṇa* claim to be a part of<sup>19</sup>. The story is also very popular among *paṭuṃyās*, members of a caste which supports itself by singing songs illustrated on scrolls (*paṭ*). In 1978 I recorded such a song by a *pāṭuṃyā* from the Midnapur district of West Bengal named Citrakār Rāy. It tells the same story. The *pāṭuṃyās* and their art are discussed in a recent book by Pañcānan Cakrabartī who includes in his account a version of the *Dātā Karṇa* story bearing the signature of Kabicandra<sup>20</sup>. Kabicandra's version differs only in minor details from the Oriya ones. Here Kṛṣṇa assumes his disguise and makes his terrible request in order to see whether Karṇa is as generous as his reputation makes him out to be. Karṇa's wife has another name, Padmāvatī (Bengali Padmābatī), as does his son, whose age is specified as five years old: he is named Vṛṣaketu (Bengali Bṛṣaketu), i.e. the same name as in the *Jaimini bhārata*. In this retelling Vṛṣaketu is outside playing with his friends when he is called in by his father to be told that a brahman guest wants his flesh for his dinner. Vṛṣaketu is quite unperturbed at this and points out that there is no difference between a brahman and Govinda<sup>21</sup> and exclaims with enthusiasm: «At last my life has been successful [...] It is my great good fortune that a brahman will eat my flesh»<sup>22</sup>. The brah-

16. This title for Karṇa also appears in Śaraḷā Dāsa's *Māhābhārata* but not in the *Dārhyatābhakti ramāmṛta* where, however, he is referred to as Dānikarṇa.

17. S.N. Sarma, in *Epics and Purāṇas in Early Assamese Literature*, Pratima Devi, Gauhati, 1972, p. 129.

18. Āsitkumār Bandyopadhyāya, *Bāṃlā Sāhitya Itibṛtta*, vol. III, Maḍārṇ Buk Egenśī, Kalikātā, 1966, p. 1066.

19. Haraprasāda Shāstrī, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Vernacular Manuscripts in the Collections of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal*, vol. ix, *Bengali manuscripts*, ed. & revised by Jogendra Nath Gupta, Calcutta, 1941 describes three mss. nos. 55, 56 and 57. The version cited here is the first. It will be referred to here as Kabicandra A. The catalogue of the Baṅgīya Sāhitya Paṇḍit list eight mss. of the *Dātā Karṇa* by Kabicandra.

20. Pañcānan Cakrabartī, *Prāgādhunik bāṃlā sāhitya o saṃskṛti*, Sāhitya Lok, Kalikātā, 1995, pp. 16-28. This version will be referred to here as Kabicandra B.

21. *brāhmaṇa gobinde bheda nāi*; Kabicandra B p. 23.

22. *etadine mora haila sārttika jibana* [sic] [...] *baṛa bhāgya mora māṃsa brāhmaṇe khāibe* || Kabicandra A folio 5.

man demands that Karna kill his son joyfully, with a smile on his face,<sup>23</sup> and that he do so with a saw (*karāta*) rather than a sword<sup>24</sup>. And so as Vṛṣaketu happily meditates on Kṛṣṇa, his father and mother saw his head off and it rolls to the floor shouting *rādhākṛṣṇa* or *kṛṣṇa kṛṣṇa*<sup>25</sup>. Here Padmavatī hides her son's head, as in the Oriya version, in order to weep over it after the brahman has left<sup>26</sup>.

The story told by Orissan, Bengali and Assamese poets is a well-known and well-travelled one which first appeared in South India in a Tamil collection of Śaiva hagiographies, the *Periyā purāṇam*, "The Great Purāṇa" written by Cēkkiḷar in the first half of the 12th century. The protagonist of the Tamil tale is a warrior named Ciṛutṇṇar, "the Little Devotee" C. George Hart, who translated this episode into English, considers it one of the most important South Indian *bhakti* themes, seeing in it "the most graphic Abraham and Isaac story I have ever encountered in India (or elsewhere, for that matter)"<sup>27</sup>, and sees in it "the most extreme imaginable act of pollution metamorphosed into a holy and pure act of devotion"<sup>28</sup>. The same tale is also the subject of a detailed study by David Shulman in his book *The Hungry God*<sup>29</sup>. In the Tamil version of the tale a *bhairava* Śaiva ascetic visits the home of Ciṛutṇṇar and asks that he and his wife serve their son to him for dinner, demanding that the mother hold the boy down while his father

23. *hāsiyā kāṭibe putra nā habe kātara. [...] kātare kāṭiyā dile māṃsa nāi khāba* || [The brahman said] "You will kill your son with a smile and not be sad [...] if you are sad when you kill him, I will not eat his flesh," *ibid*.

24. Though the text of the *Dārhyatā bhakti rasāmṛta* states that Karna decapitates his son with a sword (*karabāḷa*), a modern illustration shows him holding a saw.

25. This is a common motif in the vernacular devotional epics where the heads of heroes and demon devotees are often described as rolling across the battlefield singing the praises of Rama or Kṛṣṇa.

26. A Bengali friend commenting on the *pāṭiyā* version of the story, notes that the Bengalis are enthusiastic fish eaters and considered fish-heads (*mācher murī*) a delicacy and assumed that this explained the brahman guest's interest in Vṛṣaketu's head.

27. George C. Hart, "The Little Devotee: Cēkkiḷar's story of Ciṛutṇṇar" in Nagatomi, M. et al, eds., *Sanskrit and Indian Studies; Essays in Honour of Daniel H.H. Ingalls*, vol. II, D. Reidel, Dordrecht, 1980, p. 217. The translation appears on pp. 221-234.

28. *Ibid*. p. 220.

29. David Shulman, *The Hungry God: Hindu Tales of Filicide and Devotion*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1993.

kills him, and that both do so “joyfully”. The parents do not have any objection to this, nor does their son, so Cīṛuttōṇṭar cuts off the boy’s head while his mother holds him. The couple decide that the meat from the boy’s head cannot be made into a proper dish so they give it to his foster mother to hide. When the *bhairava* later asks if they had used the meat from the head in the curry and is told that they did not, the boy’s parents are distressed for the first time, fearing the displeasure of their guest, but they are saved from embarrassment when the thoughtful foster mother comes out of the kitchen with a curry made from the boy’s head: she had the foresight to suspect that their guest would want to eat the head as well and so had prepared it for him. The rest of the tale unfolds as in the Oriya and Bengali versions with the difference that here the guest reveals himself to be Śiva, not Viṣṇu.

In the following centuries the story migrated northwards. The Telugu poet Somanātha included it in his 13th century *Bāsavapurāṇamu* where he states that he has taken his version of the story from oral sources. The Telugu versions, in which Cīṛuttōṇṭar is named Siriyāla, differ in many particulars from the Tamil<sup>30</sup>. Eventually the story made its way to northern India. Shulman refers in passing to versions “fairly distant” from the Tamil original in two Sanskrit texts composed in Maharashtra, the *Tāpimāhātmya* and *Narmadāmāhatmya*, as well as folktale versions in Gujarati and Kashmiri.<sup>31</sup> The story was obviously well known in Marathi as well since it is referred to several times in similes in the *Bhakta vijaya*, a hagiographical compendium written by the Marathi poet Mahipati (1715-1790). «Just as when [Śiva] came as a guest into the palace of Shriyala and asked to be served with human flesh», the poet notes in one such simile, «he (Shriyala) killed his own son»<sup>32</sup>. Elsewhere Mahipati writes that Rāmānanda once said he would test the mind of his prospective pupil Kabīr «as when Vishvamitra gave Harishcandra’s mind a severe test; or as when Shiva came as the uninvited guest to Shriyal; or as when Karna fell on the

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30. For these see *ibid.*, pp. 48-86.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

32. *Stories of Indian Saints: a Translation of Mahipati’s Marathi bhaktavijaya* by JUSTIN E. ABBOT and NARHAR R. GODBOLE, reprint. Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi [1933] 1995, vol. I, p. 103.



pile of arrows when Krishna went to him for some gift»<sup>33</sup>. Shriyal is Siriyāl, the Telugu name of Cīṛuttoṇṭar. The connection of his name with that of Hariścandra, as will be seen, is significant. The third member of the latter simile seems to refer to an apocryphal act of self sacrifice of the part of Karṇa which could not be identified by the Marathi scholars I consulted.

In his article "Ritual Songs of the Lower Castes in Tirhut", the Japanese scholar Shingo Einoo writes that he collected three Maithili songs telling the story of how a god visits a Ḍom woman named Hiranī Ḍomnī and demands that she prepare food for him by killing her only son. She does as demanded and serves the god a meal of meat from her son's body and at the end of the story the son regains his life<sup>34</sup>. The story also makes a surprising appearance in a biography, *Janam sākhi*, of Gurū Nānak. According to it, once while Gurū Nānak was on Singhaladīpa, i.e. Sri Lanka, he was the guest of king Sivnābhi and demanded his son for his dinner, insisting that the king and his wife kill and make a stew of his flesh and "put it in their mouths"<sup>35</sup>. In his comments upon the Sikh version of the story, W.H. McLeod assumes that it is derived from the story of King Śibi (or Śibi) who was visited by Viśvakarman in brahman disguise and asked that he cook his son for his dinner<sup>36</sup>. Finally it can be noted that the theme also appears in Bengal in a second form: embedded in the Hariścandra episode (*hariścandrer pālā*) of the *Dharma maṅgal*, a Bengali folk epic glorifying the regional god Dharma<sup>37</sup>. This is not a

33. *Ibid.* p. 115.

34. "The Ritual Songs of the Lower Castes in Tirhut" in W.L. SMITH, ed., *Maithili Studies, Papers Presented at the Stockholm Conference on Maithili Language and Literature*, Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi, in press, p. 129.

35. *The Ādi Granth or Holy Scriptures of the Sikhs*, trans. by Ernest Trumpp, reprint [1877] Biblio Verlag, Osnabrück, 1974, p. xxxvii. Trumpp includes versions of two *Janam sākhis* in the introduction to his translation.

36. W.H. McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition: A Study of the Janam-sākhis*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1980, p. 162. The reference that McLeod gives is the *Mārkeṇḍeya samāśya parva* of the *Mahābhārata*, 3.197. Unfortunately he does not say which edition of the *Mahābhārata* he is referring to. Such a story is not found in the critical edition and in the Gītā Press edition 3.197 contains the well-known story of how King Śibi offers his own flesh to a hawk.

37. The versions consulted were *Dharma maṅgal* by Ghanarām Cakrabartī, ed. Piyuṣ Kānti Mahāpātra, Calcutta University 1962, p. 67ff. and *Dharma maṅgal* by Mānikrām Gaṅguli, ed. Bijitkumār Datta, Calcutta University, 1960, p. 60ff.

devotional work. Here Luhicandra, or Luhiścandra, the son of Hariścandra, shoots a pellet (*bāṭul*) at an owl which turns out to be the vehicle of the god Dharma. When the owl informs Dharma of the insult, the god takes the form of a brahman beggar and comes to the home of Hariścandra and his wife Madanā, and demands the flesh of their son for a meal. According to the version of the tale in the *Dharma maṅgal* of Ghanarām, Hariścandra offers his own flesh instead, citing at length the examples of King Śibi and Mayūradhvaja<sup>38</sup>. His offer is rejected. Otherwise the story in all its essentials is the same as in the *Dātā Karṇa* tale: the parents are asked to kill the son together, Luhicandra is an enthusiastic victim and his mother hides his decapitated head. Though the *Dharma maṅgal* is an ancient theme, extant versions are late, dating from the 18th century, and it seems that it has absorbed the episode from a devotional source.

It is not easy to see exactly how the story of the Ciṛuttoṇṭar made its way to northeast India from Tamilnad. Since Kabicandra's version of the story is much closer to the Tamil than it is to the Telugu versions, and closer than the Oriya versions, it seems unlikely that it reached Bengal by way of Orissa and Andhra Pradesh. In both the Bengali and the Tamil stories the age of the son is specified at five years, while in the *Darhyatā bhaki rasāmṛta* it is twelve (Śāraḷā Dāsa makes no mention of it), and in both the Tamil and the Bengali versions the brahman guest insists that the father kill his son "joyfully" and that he does so together with his wife. The Bengali version also contains what might seem a minor deviant detail: Karṇa is told to saw off his son's head with a saw, not chop it off with a sword. This brings to mind the story of Mayūradhvaja referred to in the *Dharma maṅgal* above. The story of him and his son Tāmradhvaja is found in the *Jaimini bhārata* and goes as follows: defeated by Tāmradhvaja on the battlefield, Kṛṣṇa transformed himself into a brahman and went to the court of his father, Mayūradhvaja. He told the king that while he and his son were travelling through the forest, they were attacked by a lion which wanted to devour his son. To save him, the brahman father offered his own body instead, but the lion refused since he was old

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38. *Ibid.* pp. 80 & 82. He refers to Mayūradhvaja as Śikhidhvaja.

and tough. He agreed, however, to exchange the son for right half of Mayūradhvaja's body since the king's flesh was tender from a lifelong diet of the most delicate foods. When Mayūradhvaja heard the brahman's story, he immediately offered his own flesh. The brahman then pointed out that the lion had stipulated that Mayūradhvaja should be cut in half with a saw (*karapatram*) and that one end of it was to be held by his wife and the other by his son, Tāmradvaja, and, finally, that he should submit to this ordeal joyfully (*harṣayuta*). If Mayūradhvaja betrayed the slightest unwillingness the bargain was off. A gift cannot be accepted unless it is given gladly. Mayūradhvaja accepted the conditions. When Mayūradhvaja's wife and son proceeded to saw him down the middle, the false brahman saw a tear fall from the king's left eye and immediately stopped the proceedings; Mayūradhvaja had shown reluctance to sacrifice himself and so his offer of half his body was rejected. Mayūradhvaja, however, explained that the tear fell from the left side of his body only because it was aware that the right side was to be offered for the sake of the brahman, while it, the left side, would merely drop to the ground and be of no use to anyone. Therefore it expressed its disappointment in the form of a tear. This explanation satisfied the brahman who then revealed himself as Kṛṣṇa and announced that Mayūradhvaja had been tested (*parikṣita*)<sup>39</sup>. Mayūradhvaja's heroic act is compared by the poet to that of Karna's giving away of his armor<sup>40</sup>. One notes here that the actors in this story are the same as in the Dātā Karna tale but play different roles: in both tales a brahman guest appears and demands human flesh, but in the one case it is the father and mother who are asked to kill the son for the sake of his flesh, and in the other it is the son and mother who are asked to kill the father for the sake of his.

David Shulman considers the theme of Cīruttoṇṭar to be one of filial sacrifice and like George Hart compares it to Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac. In accordance with this, he follows his examination of the Tamil and Telugu versions of the story with a discussion of the Sanskrit myth of Hariścandra. There are two very different Sanskrit myths featuring King Hariścandra. One, which first appears in the

39. Śrījaiminiyāśvamedhaparva; 46.34-58.

40. kavacaṇi bhānujo yathā; 45.32.

*Aitareya brāhmaṇa* (7.13-18), tells how Hariścandra vows to Varuṇa that if a son is born to him, he will offer him to the god in sacrifice. When a son, Rohita, is born, however, Hariścandra repeatedly postpones the sacrifice and finally purchases Śunaḥśepa, the son of the brahman Ajīgarta, to sacrifice in place of Rohita. Śunaḥśepa is saved by divine intervention at the last moment. This story is also told in the *Rāmāyaṇa* (1.61) where the protagonist is Ambarīṣa, king of Ayodhyā rather than Hariścandra. The second Hariścandra story, a better known one, is found in the *Mārkaṇḍeya purāṇa*<sup>41</sup> and many later texts. It tells how the brahman Viśvāmītra asks king Hariścandra for alms. Hariścandra offers him whatever he wants, and the sage takes him at his word and demands his entire kingdom, all his possessions, and, finally, asks that he sell his wife and his son and give him the proceeds. Hariścandra complies. The erstwhile king sinks to the status of the servant of a caṇḍāl working in the cremation grounds and his ordeal reaches its nadir when the body of his son, dead of snake bite, is brought to him to be burnt. At this point the gods appear to announce that they are impressed with his fortitude and all is restored to him. This second story is relegated by Shulman to a footnote in which he writes that, "The purāṇic Hariścandra - who also, in some sense, sacrifices his son- deserves a book of his own; precisely for this reason, we cannot explore his story here"<sup>42</sup>. Medieval Indian hagiographers, in unanimous contrast to Shulman, see the more obvious parallel to the story of Cīṣṭuṇṭar/ Karṇa in the second Hariścandra myth. In Mahipati's simile, quoted earlier, as seen, Karṇa, "Shriyal" (Siriyaḷa) and Hariścandra are named together<sup>43</sup>; in Śāraḷā Dāsa's *Mahābhārata* the Dātā Karṇa story is immediately followed by the story of Hariścandra and in the *Daṛhyatā bhakti rasāmṛta* it is immediately preceded by the tale of Hariścandra, while Kabicandra compares Karṇa to the purāṇic king<sup>44</sup>. In all cases the Hariścandra referred to is

41. For a translation see CORNELIA DIMMIT and J.A.B. VAN BUITENEN, *Classical Hindu Mythology: A Reader in the Sanskrit Purāṇas*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1978, pp. 274-286.

42. *Op. cit.* p. 87 footnote 1.

43. And again on p. 85 of *op. cit.* where he mentions together Hariścandra, Shriyal, Ambarīṣa and Bali.

44. *pūrbbe jena haścandra (sic) mahārājā chila | tāhāra samāna dātā*: "Earlier king Hariścandra was a giver equal to him"; Kabicandra A folio 7.

the practitioner of heroic charity, a figure much the opposite of the other, not at all exemplary Hariścandra who tries to weasel out of his solemn promise to the god Varuṇa.

The medieval hagiographers obviously saw the theme of the Dātā Karna tale as one of generosity, not filial sacrifice. In the *Dārhyatā bhakti rasāmṛta* it is preceded by the stories of the noble demon Bali who cheerfully gives away the three worlds to the dwarf avatar of Viṣṇu, and of king Hariścandra, and is followed by a number of devotional variants on the same theme. In these, however, as in the Dātā Karna tale, the generosity is of a very specific kind: culinary charity. The fourth story in the Oriya collection tells how the son of householder devotee Dīnabadhu Dās suddenly dies of snakebite. At that very moment a brahman mendicant arrives and asks for a meal; Dīnabadhu forgets his grief and feeds his guest even though his son's corpse lies in the next room. This is followed by a story about how the wife of the devout Dāmodara Dāsa cuts off and sells her hair to obtain money to buy food for a visiting saint. The story after that features the devotee Bīśambhara who together with his son breaks into a house in order to procure ghee for Vaiṣṇava visitors. During the burglary they are discovered and his son is decapitated, but, unperturbed, Bīśambhara returns to his guests with the ghee<sup>45</sup>. This same story is told in Mahipati where the role of Bīśambhara is played by Kabīr<sup>46</sup>. In another such story, Kabīr happily acquiesces when his wife offers her body to a lecherous grocer in exchange for provisions needed to feed guests<sup>47</sup>. In all the Oriya stories the demanding guest is none other than Kṛṣṇa in disguise; he has heard of the fame of the devotees and comes in order to test (or trick) (Oriya *biribā*) them. The motif is also common in other hagiographic literatures and highlights a much emphasized feature of the devotional movement: the obligation of feeding one's fellow devotees. This, alongside the communal singing of *kīrtans*, was one of the most important ways of demonstrating one's solidarity with the fellowship of the saints, the *satsaṅg*, a loyalty which supercedes that to one's family as well as lesser moral considerations: thus Dīnabadhu Dās ignores his dead son, Bīśambhara

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45. *Dārhyatābhakti rasāmṛta*, pp. 24-49.

46. *Op. cit.*, pp. 99-108.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 99f.

becomes a thief, Kabīr lets his wife prostitute herself and Karṇa and his wife kill their son.

The motif of the cannibal guest first appeared in the *Periya purāṇam*, a work which often expresses the “violent and fanatic devotion of the Nāyanārs”<sup>48</sup> and it seems remarkable that such a horrific tale made its way into the hagiographical literatures of the milder Vaiṣṇavas of Orissa and Bengal. But the very fact that they did adopt it demonstrates how important they considered this virtue to be. One notes how the other “horrific” themes in the *Periya purāṇam* never found a home in the north. Nevertheless some changes were made in the story. In the Tamil original Cīṟuttoṇṭar is overwhelmingly anxious to please his *bhairava* guest and never utters a syllable of protest at his terrible demand, never expresses the slightest doubt about the propriety of slaughtering his son, and never displays the slightest grief when he does so. His guest’s wants supercede all else. In the Oriya and Bengali versions, in great contrast, Karṇa protests, suspects trickery, groans, bursts into tears and faints, and his wife behaves in a similar way. They placate their guest but not at all with the same cheerful willingness as Cīṟuttoṇṭar. There the brahman guest has to manoeuvre Karṇa into a trap before making his terrible request. Before stating his wants, he insists that Karṇa swear a solemn oath (Oriya *satya*) or make a solemn promise (Bengali *aṅgikāra*) that he will give him whatever he might ask for. Once Karṇa has made the promise, he realizes that a refusal to satisfy his guest will not only be a grave violation of the laws of hospitality and the obligation of charity, but would make him guilty of another serious sin, especially for a king and a kṣatriya, that of breaking one’s plighted word. «If I do not give him [what he asks]» says Karṇa in an Oriya version, «I will be one who has broken his oath (*satyabhaṅga*) and when I die, I will go to hell»<sup>49</sup>. He voices very similar words in Kābīcandra<sup>50</sup>. His brah-

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48. For this see D. Dennis Hudson, “Violent and fanatic devotion of the Nāyanārs: A Study of in the *Periya Purāṇam* of Cēkīlār”, in ALF HILTEBEITEL, ed. *Criminal Gods and Demon Devotees: Essays on the Guardians of Popular Hinduism*, Manohar, New Delhi, 1990.

49. *na dele satyabhaṅga hebi | male narake sinā yiba || Daṛhyatā bhakti rasāmṛta*, p. 18.

50. *karṇa bale ei karmma yadi nā karibe | aṅgikāra bhaṅga hale narake*

man guest, quite naturally, does not hesitate to remind him of this fact. The importance of keeping one's word it can be remembered, is the mainspring of the *Rāmāyaṇa* where Daśaratha banishes his favorite son Rāma to the wilderness to order to keep his promise and Rāma suffers years of exile for the same reason. Thus while the Vaiṣṇavas of Orissa, Bengal and Assam were willing to accept the Tamil tale because of its effective dramatization of the all-important duty of culinary charity, they did not do so without qualification.

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*paribe*; "If Karṇa does not do this deed, his oath is broken and he will fall into hell". Kābīcandra B p. 19.